

## "French Polish."

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"*Le je ne sais quoi qui plaît.*"—LORD CHESTERFIELD.

It is a pity that, in these days of systematic cramming, one or two important branches of education run the risk of being crowded out.

The delightful art of good letter-writing has fallen into disuse with the era of the half-penny post-card; and who dreams nowadays of referring to a certain little obsolete work entitled "Ye Boke of Good Maneres"?

Not so across the Channel. The French nation, whatever defects it have, will to the last maintain its character for politeness. We insular folk, in our superior way, call this inimitable quality of theirs "French polish," and sometimes hurry to order it wholesale for the children in the shape of a nursery governess from Paris. After a little, the young people converse in French quite prettily and correctly; but—their manners remain unchanged. They are not in the least like mademoiselle's former pupils in the Rue St. Honoré.

You see, this kind of French polish cannot be laid on like veneering. You have underrated it; it is in the grain, and must be constantly rubbed bright by careful hands. That winning grace of manner, which is true politeness, is simply kindness not ashamed to show itself in a thousand happy ways.

Now the idea in France is, that one cannot begin too soon to stop a child's egotism, and encourage its innate tact for others; in other words, to train its manners.

As soon as the little creature can lisp she is taught to say

"*Bonne-Maman,*" with a certain sweet reverence, which is more welcome to elderly ears than our pert soubriquet, "Granny."

Every recurring event of the day, each of those little family festivals, whose observance relieves the prose of the humblest French household, becomes an occasion for exercising the little one's expansiveness. A stranger is in the house, and is summoned to breakfast. In England our little "Ethel" or "Gertie" would perhaps stare at him, wait to be introduced, stare at him again, and then doubtless criticise him in her little girl's mind, wondering in how far his presence may interfere with—or add to—her own comfort through the day. Egotism is at the bottom of Miss Ethel's cogitations.

But the stranger is in *France*. Little five-year-old Marguerite knows that she must shake hands and say "How are you this morning, Monsieur? I hope you have slept well!" As a member of the family she is bound to play hostess; and the very words her tiny lips repeat lead her to be concerned for the stranger's welfare. "How dreadful," speculates the little woman, who has just risen fresh and rosy from her own soft little cot, "how dreadful it would be to lie awake, ill and frightened, in a strange house for the first time. Oh! no, but this isn't a strange house! We'll make him feel *that* all the time he is here."

Our little Marguerite is quite accustomed to this sort of hospitality. Her feet have already trotted scores of times for footstools and cushions to prop up aunties and grown-up acquaintances; her best toys have quenched the tears of numbers of homesick and shy little boys and girls; and on every occasion her child's heart has gained a new experience in loving, until at last, its dictates have become the mainspring of her politeness, the secret cause of the little girl's good manners.

I remember a child who was polite towards her dolls. One day she received a present of a "nigger-dolly"; and what did little Julie do with it? She brought it into the nursery where all its future companions, with their golden locks, blue eyes, and lovely pink-and-white waxen faces, were ranged in a row along the sofa; and she said, "Now, dollies dear, you are to be kind and gentle to the little stranger. You see she is black, for she has come all the way from Jamaica to play with you; but you are not to laugh at her, that would be rude and cause poor Topsy to cry. You are to kiss her and love her."

Little Julie merely repeats what careful Mamma has taught herself. She hands down the accepted tradition of courtesy and good manners. As she grows older, it is the self-same lesson in many forms, which is impressed upon her mind by example and precept.

She learns without difficulty to be gracious to the poor, to drop her coin into the hat of the mutilated beggar with a tender glance of sympathy, her good breeding aiding her to overcome any sentiment of repugnance at the sight of his infirmity—unlike those well-meaning people who mar their own charity and offend the poor by a fastidious and patronising manner.

She learns that when invited out with her young companions she must listen attentively and civilly to the longest narration of her school friends, no matter how intensely interesting the secret which she longs to impart. She knows that she must not yawn in Clotilde's face, nor say "Yes, yes, I have heard that anecdote before." She is taught to restrain herself when dessert is passed round, and she unconsciously blushes for the ill-mannered little girl who snatches at the largest cream cake on the side dish.

As a tall girl, when entrusted with the household purchases, she understands how to make herself respected in the shops. With modest dignity she waits her turn at the over-crowded counter, and finally inquires for the article she wants in a gentle tone, with a quiet, collected manner, giving courteous heed, however, to the salesman's advice, and thus adding to her general stock of practical knowledge.

The good manners our little French friend acquires so easily have been inculcated from her earliest infancy; and have been attended to without interruption from the moment she first toddled through the nursery, until the day she drove off to the boarding-school; and from then, till she herself settled down in her new household, and began to continue the same tradition with her own first-born.

The child who was polite towards her dolls, and amiable towards her class-mates, you may identify now in the polished and cultivated gentlewoman. You perceive by her whole manner that she is a lady. Regard for others and self-command, render her constant service in each event and accident of her everyday life, from the smashing of her favourite *Sèvres* by a careless servant, to the breaking down of the engine on board

the Calais mail packet. And, for all, she has to thank the careful and assiduous home-training in good manners.

"But, alas!" exclaims the British mother of a large family, "As our girls grow older, and are required to work for their horrid examinations, how can we worry them about trifles?" "My daughter," boasts another matron, bridling at our remarks, "has the good sense to see these things for herself, and knows perfectly well when to be polite and when . . . ."

"Not!" You have just expressed it, Madam, "when, and when *not*." In a word, you have betrayed the motto of spurious good manners. With real courtesy there are no such conditions; for deference to others is a quality to be nurtured day by day, and year by year, like a plant. Neglect, sneers, and snubbing may blight it altogether; but good care may train it into the fairest flower that graces lovely womanhood.

Our French maiden has her classes to attend, her compositions to prepare, her "chromatic scales" to practise; but, before all her school tasks in importance, ranks grandpapa's birthday letter, godmother's favourite poem to be repeated on New Year's morning, the sonata learnt by stealth against the day of the invalid mother's convalescence.

The constant exercise of regard for others produces a certain ease of manner which, as a rule, the French possess, and which is of invaluable importance in society. Its absence is too bitterly felt sometimes by some of our own young compatriots.

Have you ever noticed the agonies our average schoolboy or girl have to undergo in the small matter of returning thanks for a present? People call it awkwardness and bashfulness; but it is actual pain.

Charlie and Lucy have received a splendid Christmas-box from old Mr. Johnston, and are called in to express their gratitude. They are delighted with their present; in their inmost hearts they adore old Mr. Johnston. Why, therefore, do they stand glowering at him, as though he were their mortal enemy, Charlie's face waxing red as a turkey cock's comb, whilst little Lucy hangs her head and fumbles with the ends of her sash? They stammer forth a few half-audible sentences, and then suddenly collapse into a helpless condition of shame. In short the interview is unpleasant to themselves, their mother, and to Mr. Johnston. The thanksgiving performance was a *fiasco*, and why? Simply because they were not accustomed to it.

The same scene in Paris would have been enacted quite differently . . . . Monsieur Petitjean arrives; the children are on the alert watching for him. They *wish* to thank him, and know right well how to show their feelings. A hearty shake of the hands, bright eyes, a very distinct "Oh, thank you, Monsieur Petitjean! How very kind it was of you to think of us! We shall take good care of your gift." All this and as much more comes quite naturally from "Charles" and "Lucile," who would consider themselves little savages were they to act otherwise. They cannot recollect the time when they were taught these things; yet, trained they were as "toddling, wee things." They have been trained also to give grown-up people the precedence in entering and leaving the room, the shop, the church, the railway train; in short, to observe that "after you," which is by no means to be despised nowadays.

Many of our English girls do not know even how to enter a room. Instead of the graceful inclination of the head, as a mark of respect or acknowledgment of recognition to those present, we have a square object, something like the engine of a steam tramcar shunted into our midst; and in lieu of the friendly pressure of the hand, a six-buttoned glove is thrust against us in a manner suggestive of the professional boxer!

How many *sit* ungracefully, giving the cold shoulder to their neighbour, turning in their toes, and turning out their elbows! For these little matters the French mother does not wait, relying upon the frantic endeavours of a "professor of calisthenics." She knows that bad manners once acquired can rarely be unlearned; and she is aware that an amiable disposition, and refined, gentle, and respectful manners will go further than silks and furs and purest diamonds towards fitting her daughter for a place in good society.

The intelligent Frenchwoman is aware of the importance of keeping her little ones fully occupied. As a thrifty housekeeper, she wastes nothing; as a wise mother, she foresees the danger of idle moments, as engendering bad habits and conducive to bad manners; and, therefore, has a hundred little devices at her command which she produces at the right moment to save the little minds and fingers from mischief.

"A rainy day," said a young Englishwoman to me, "is a calamity at the seaside. Out of the holidays, I don't mind it so much; but when the children are at home, it is really dreadful."

Ere forty-eight hours had passed I was ready to agree with her. "It has set in for a wet day all round, ma'am," pronounced nurse with a sigh, as she deposited the youngest child on the hearthrug, and cast an ominous glance in the direction of the three elder children.

Breakfast was over, and before many minutes Dora, the eldest girl, came sidling round with a woe-begone little face. "What shall I do next?" she wailed forth, swinging herself by the back of her mother's chair and dangling her slipper.

"Shall I give you all something to do?" responded the house-mother half irritably.

"No, no, no," growled forth three dissatisfied young voices. "It's holidays; only that horrid rain——"

"Keep quiet and amuse yourselves till it is over. Perhaps somebody would tell you a fairy tale?" suggested the poor little mother with an appealing glance at me.

"No, a real true story," screamed Dora.

"I don't like stories; I like soap bubbles," interposed the querulous accents of little Madgie, the delicate, ailing one of the trio.

"Shut up, you girls," cried Bobbie, "and let's have *Robber Kings!* I'll have the sofa for my den."

"A good romp can do them no harm," said my friend, trying to yield with a good grace. "Take care of the glass shades, Dora—and, Bobbie, you be gentle with little Madgie," she added in beseeching accents.

But her words were already drowned in the bustle of chair-hauling, pillow-piling—preliminaries for the barricading of a feudal castle. We older people were ejected from our comfortable chairs, and were forced to retreat with baby to a remote region; but the walls were not thick enough to shut out the sounds of thumps and thuds and bangs against the sitting-room door.

My friend tried to look calm, and repeated with the faintest smile in the world, "I do like them to enjoy themselves." This was a stereotyped phrase with her, and summed up her notions respecting her children's education.

"And do you think they *are* enjoying themselves?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, of course they are." And at this instant our own door was flung open, and in burst Dora, all excited, her hair wild, her cheeks aflame, her eyes sparkling, voice out of its

natural register. "Mother, we were having such fun, only Bobbie was so nasty, he would play no more when I got Queen."

"She pinched Madgie for being on my side," retorted the little boy in a wrathful tone, "and I merely boxed Madgie's ears once when she did the traitor, and didn't hurt her at all. Ask herself."

At this juncture Nurse appeared on the scene, bearing the sobbing ex-traitress in her arms.

The little folk were not one whit more courteous to each other, more deferential towards their mother, out-of-doors than indoors. There were the same jealousies about the spades and buckets, the same exhibitions of temper, the same mutual recriminations; only they did not oppress one's nerves so much in the open air as within the four walls of the small hired villa. The mother was like the ostrich with its head in the sand. So long as the little people did not overwhelm her with their boisterousness nor annihilate one another, no positive harm—she thought—could exist. She did not see that they were contracting coarse manners, rude modes of feeling, for life.

The following winter I was staying in a *faubourg* of Paris a few weeks after Christmastide, with a French family consisting of a bank clerk, his wife, and their two little daughters. How well I recollect one dark morning when we rose to find snow descending in thick, solid flakes. The young papa had to start off for his "bureau"; but before leaving, he decided that his little girls should remain at home all day.

"And the sledges," began the little women, all disappointed. "Cousin Victor and Cousin Maurice promised to give us a ride."

"Not to-day, dears," interposed their mamma, "perhaps to-morrow, when the snow is firm."

Not a word more was spoken just then; but I noticed one little body's eyes blinking very hard; and another little person's underlip quivering almost comically. At last, after an interval, little Sophie whispered softly, "Is your head aching, mamma? You say it generally does when the snow falls."

"A little, but not much, darling."  
"Ah, we will keep very quiet then, and not disturb you! And see, here is a cushion, and a high footstool. Now, rest nicely, and you'll soon be better," added the little mite, in quite a motherly, soothing tone.

"Mother," lisped out the younger sister, "I'm here, too, if you want anything. And if Victor and Maurice do come, we'll listen, and open before they ring."

My French friend and I involuntarily exchanged amused glances over the self-imposed carefulness of the precocious little couple. Very soon my companion dropped fast asleep, whilst I became absorbed in the book I was reading. After some time I raised my head, and looked round to ascertain what had become of the children.

The snow was still falling, falling lazily, in thick flakes: at a small table near the window sat Sophie stringing beads; beside her, and very much pre-occupied by his work, was her cousin Maurice, pasting pictures into an album. Victor was manufacturing a bead necklace almost as long as Sophie's; whilst three-year old little Laure, her elbows on the table, and her little chin resting on her chubby fists, was intently gazing at all three. In the general anxiety not to arouse the mamma, I too had been left undisturbed.

"O you sweet darlings, how good you were!" cried the fond young mother at last, shaking herself up, refreshed after an hour's unbroken slumber, and turning her eyes on the garland of happy faces clustered by the window.

Now these little French children were civilised and polite; but the fact of finding interesting occupation ready to hand did much to keep up their good behaviour. In that house such emergencies were foreseen, and suitably provided for by the parents.

